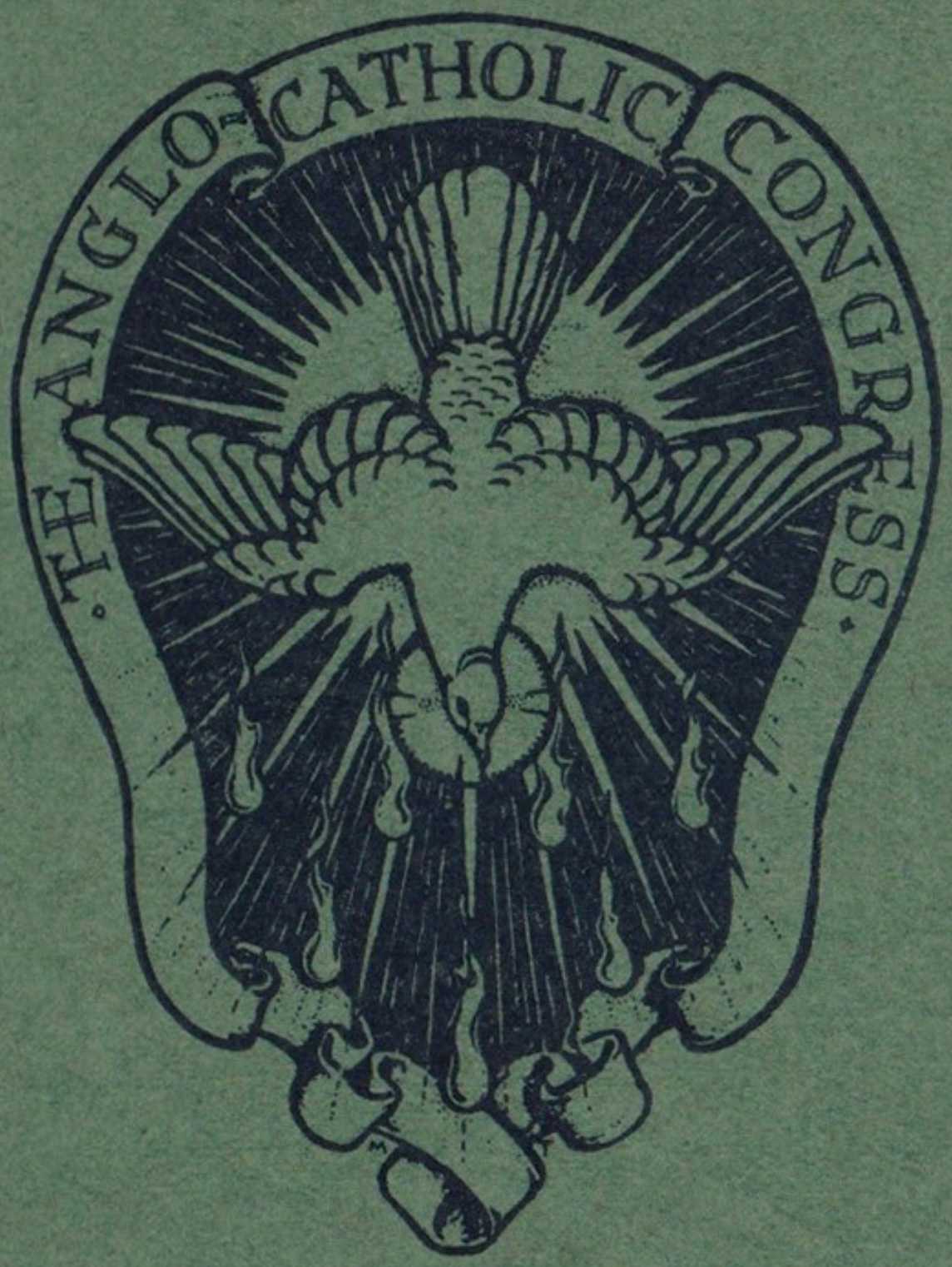
THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 14

THE USE OF CREEDS



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Examining Chaplain to the Bishop
of Ripon

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The Use of Creeds

AT first sight there seem to be two questions which ought to be kept carefully apart. The first would be, What is the use of creeds? How far is an authoritative form of belief necessary to the well-being of the Church? The second would be, What is the use of the creeds? How far are the historical and traditional forms of belief still satisfactory?

In theory, there seems no reason why a person should not answer the two questions differently; why a man should not be a fanatic for creeds in general, and a fierce opponent of the orthodox creeds in particular. In theory, there seems no reason why Christian Science or Theosophy should not have their formal statements of belief. Even Materialism, Agnosticism, or Atheism might inspire their followers to construct definitions. Indeed we do speak vaguely of a scientist's 'confession of faith' in his own science; and William James tells us of an enthusiastic atheist who 'worshipped no-god.'

But when we quit theory for fact, we find

that this is not what happens. There are no real rivals to the creeds of Christendom. The people who find them stumbling-blocks usually object quite as much to the very existence of creeds as to what they contain. It is true in general to say that the further we get from the main stream of Christian tradition, the less we find creeds in actual use, and once out of sight of that, they practically disappear.

We might try to account for this in two ways. Either we might say that the forms of opinion most recalcitrant to credal expression were largely negative and critical, and that no one can create an inspiring creed out of clauses which begin, 'I do not believe': or we might say that the people who hold such opinions do not tend to form communities, and therefore do not need such symbols either as tests of membership or as corporate acts of devotion. Both these explanations are true, as far as they go: but they do not cover the whole ground. The main reason why we are justified in saying that the use of creeds means in practice the use of the historical creeds, is that creeds are an invention of Christianity.

Among the Jews creeds were not required. Even after they had lost their civil independence, they only cherished the more fervently their sense of being 'the chosen people' of God. Politically, indeed, they were lost in the great and unsympathetic Roman Empire; but as 'sons of Abraham' they could make

the proud boast, 'We have never been in bondage to any man' (*St. John* viii. 33). They were held together by no creed, but by such practices as circumcision, and the keeping of the Sabbath and the festivals, and by their special customs in regard to food—tests so rigid, that orthodoxy for a Jew seemed not so much believing, as belonging to a nation.

In the Gentile world at the time of our Lord, we find three prominent forms of 'religion,' though the word has to be used rather loosely to cover them all. First there was the growing worship of the Emperor: this was mainly a political bond, and does not concern us much. No creed was imposed in connexion with it: to treat the Caesar as a God was rather a compliment than a religious act. The incense thrown on his altar was meant as a test of loyalty to the Empire, and had no connexion with any one's personal convictions about the spiritual world.

The second and far more important type of religion was practised in the Mystery Fellowships, where again the bond was not a creed, but the fact of having taken part in the same ceremonies, which often included the partaking of a 'sacramental' meal.

The third type hardly involves a community and can hardly be called a religion, but it has an importance in connexion with the origin of creeds: I mean the systems and beliefs of the philosophic schools. Though here, again

there were no creeds, the followers of a teacher would be informally grouped together. The statements and lectures of the master would tend to be treated as 'canonical.' In this vague sense the dialogues of Plato would be 'the scriptures' of the Platonist, and the lectures of Epictetus embody 'the creed' of certain Stoics.

Now the break with the Jews 'cut the Church off from its base at Jerusalem.' St. Paul and the other apostles had refused to allow it to become a mere group of dissenters from Jewish orthodoxy: they had taken the risk of dropping the old national tie with its circumcision and festivals. Hence nationality failed to make any bond of union for the Church. Nor did political unity provide one: Christianity could still less be identified with the Roman Empire than it could with the Jewish nation. And if we ask, why then was not the sacramental brotherhood of the Eucharist enough as a centre of Church unity, like the corresponding rites in the mystery religions, the answer is, that the Church was the accredited witness to something that had actually happened, to certain historical facts that had been seen and handled.

If we consider, as a contrast with Christianity, Apuleius' description of his initiation into the Mysteries of Isis, two things strike us at once. First, that he beheld secrets which could not lawfully be repeated to the

uninitiated : secondly, that he was shown some merely symbolical performance, a 'drama' cunningly stage-managed by the priests. But he was never in touch with history : he had no confession of faith, for he was not a witness to anything that had ever happened on this earth—only to certain supposed secrets about the supernatural world. In the mystery religions, indeed, the crowd was taught the stories of Osiris and of Mithras ; but it did not matter if they were true or not, and intelligent people merely understood them as parables. The Church, on the other hand, began by consisting of Jews, men who were convinced that God acted in the full light of history, plain for every one to see. 'God is my king of old : the help that is done upon earth he doeth it himself.' And for the Christian, this had culminated in one great act, the saving life and work of the Messiah.

So for him the Eucharist was not a mere symbolic act by which the initiated were let into the secret of some distant demigod : it was a rite founded by a divine Master, who had been seen and known, to perpetuate his presence and power. Creeds were necessary, because, in contrast to the Gentile faiths, and more intensely than the Jews, the Christian Church asserted the supreme necessity of belief in something that had happened. So St. Paul, in one of the earliest descriptions of a Christian Eucharist, clearly connects it up

with the facts to which he was a witness. 'For I have received of the Lord, that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus, the same night that he was betrayed, took bread' (1 *Cor.* xi. 23).

THE creeds then emerged as an act of personal assent to a tradition of faith. But when we pass from the Apostle's Creed to the Nicene Creed, we pass in some degree from mere fact to the interpretation of fact. The most famous example, of course, is the adoption of the 'unscriptural' word 'homoousios' (that Christ is 'of one substance with' the Father). Hitherto the Church, content with the Pauline language, had called our Lord 'the Son of God.' But the subtle Alexandrian heretics found difficulties in so simple a relation as that of Father and Son. Arians stood in the streets and asked passers-by: 'Have you ever heard of a father who did not exist before his son? He that is begotten must come after him that begets. There must have been a time before the Son of God was created.'

It was in answer to this misuse of simple terms that the Church was forced most reluctantly to adopt more complicated ones. The Church was only concerned to assert that Christ was really God in a sense that no other

man could be. If she was wrong, of course the terms she used fall to the ground. If she was right, what could she do but use the current language of the day? She was not trying to invent new doctrine, but to safeguard old fact.

So, if we are told that the creeds call for revision, the question arises: Do we merely need new language to express the old idea, or do we think the idea itself out of date? Have we a better way of saying that Christ is God, than of saying that he is the same as God? or do we believe that he 'became God,' or is divine only in the sense that we all may be? There is all the difference in the world between expressing ancient truth in terms of modern thought, and dressing up modern ideas in the ancient language. One is development: the other repudiation. One is revision in the sense of a 'Revised' version of the Bible: the other is revision in the sense that a man is said to 'revise' the beliefs of a life-time. The view that Christian 'progress' involves an indefinite series of new statements of belief would make us need to alter an old text and represent our Lord as saying, 'Heaven and earth will never pass away, but my words will be revised, from time to time, as need arises.'

The creeds then, as distinct from the promises of salvation in the gospel, show the Church not only recording facts, but inter-

preting them by her living and growing experience. She never became on the one hand a mere chronicler of fact that had once happened (and so Christianity was never 'a Religion of a Book'); nor yet, on the other hand (as some of the speculative Greeks would have wished) did she launch out into the air and build speculative intellectual systems to account for the universe. She valued, not facts for their own sake, nor theories for their own sake, but the facts of history as implying certain beliefs about the universe. From this point of view, even the epistles of the New Testament partake partly of the nature of gospels, partly of the nature of creeds, because they themselves abound in interpretations set upon the plain gospel facts. Behind both Bible and creeds lies the spoken tradition of Christianity, expressing itself in both these different ways.[1]

The doctrinal use of the creeds then is to place before every member of the Church, for his or her personal assent, the statement of certain historical 'saving' facts, as interpreted by the Church.

[1] Before passing on it may be well to point out that this pamphlet is necessarily not concerned with the question whether the Catholic Church was and is justified in her interpretation of the gospel facts, and in ascribing to that interpretation the importance she does. It only aims at showing how the Creeds form an integral part of her attitude as teacher. For the wider question the reader is referred to Dr. Gore's treatment of the whole subject in his book *Belief in Christ*.

10 The Creeds in Worship

WE have now to consider certain secondary uses—three manners in which the Church brings the creeds before her members. Their public use has two aspects : one positive, their part in the worship of the society—their liturgical use ; the other negative—their disciplinary use as tests of membership. They have also a private, or devotional, use.

Their liturgical use is bound up with the belief that Christ meant to found a society meant to include all mankind. They are rightly called Catholic, that is universal. If such a conception has to our ears a ring of intolerance, it was to the early Church something in which to glory. The vision of a Church which should include Jew and Gentile, bond and free, philosopher and peasant, seemed a great and comprehensive ideal. When we think of a creed we should not think of a document to which some menacing priest is extorting reluctant signatures, or as something ' meant to make it more difficult for us ' ; we should rather think of a great concourse (such as the first Anglo-Catholic Congress at the Albert Hall) reciting it with one heart and voice, and the air darkened as the faithful cross themselves ; or else of the swell and thunder of the ' Credo ' in Bach's Mass.

Only when we have at the back of our minds some such picture of the creeds in action, can we put in their right place certain

difficulties born, I believe, of a very honest but over-scrupulous 'sincerity.' Sincerity is a fine word and a fine thing. But it is sometimes confused with refusal to learn. The creeds are not yours: they belong to the Body of Christ. They are not something that you make: they claim to be something that makes you. 'But there are parts of the creed I can't understand or honestly accept.' No one asks of any man to be untrue to himself; but is it too much to plead for patience and the desire to learn?

'Sincerity' is so often a relative thing. Do we refuse to join in the General Confession because we are not in the mood? Are our poor prayers less honest because they are so far from the prayers of a saint? The creed is the full and rich expression of the faith of the whole Church into which we are trying to enter. If this is to sacrifice sincerity to the good of society, then people of different temperament cannot be 'one.' Brotherhood then can only be bought at the price of disunion.

This is the place for some remarks upon the use of the Athanasian Creed. It is best treated as a battle-hymn (as the 'Gloria' at the end implies) and sung in procession. Two main difficulties are felt about it. Parts of it are thought to be obscure, and parts of it too clear. Some clauses seem spoken darkly, others with a terrible plainness.

The first objection refers to the metaphysical

setting, the paradoxical statement of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the two natures of Christ. Undoubtedly they present the creed on its intellectual, not on its ethical side: it has always interested and often satisfied philosophers. 'But the congregation knows no philosophy.' It is very English to regard philosophy as a remote and tiresome study for specialists, but it is curious that people who are always criticizing the Church for having no intellectual background, should be the first to mock when she tries to present it to them. It is well that the many should realize at stated intervals that people have been helped by the creeds to think as well as to act. How far the Athanasian Creed can be explained so as to mean anything to the ordinary person is a question of practical exposition, with which the Church has perhaps too rarely occupied herself. But to say straight off that it is impossible, is to put a gulf between the few thinkers and the many faithful which menaces the brotherhood, and allows a divorce between faith and speculation which, in the end, is harmful for both.

The 'outspoken' parts of the creed are of course the 'damnatory' clauses, which seem to condemn unbelievers to eternal punishment. We cannot discuss this vast subject here: a word may be in place.

After all the errors in translation have been removed, the fact remains, I suppose, that the

people who first used the creed meant by it in certain places something which many modern people find it difficult to believe. We must, therefore, ask them to concentrate on the positive rather than on the negative aspect of the truth these clauses proclaim. It is possible, I think, to say simply and sincerely that because the Catholic faith is the real and sole truth, therefore to believe it wholly is to reach the summit of salvation. If we like, we can assert the reverse side of this, and say that not to believe it is to perish; without thereby believing in 'a calendar of the lost' (which the Church has never kept) and without denying that here or hereafter, God will lead all who honestly seek him into the whole truth.

THE disciplinary use of creeds is the other—or negative—side of their liturgical use; for if to join in the recitation of the creeds is a high privilege of membership, to refuse to do so is (in some sense) to 'cut ourselves off' from the society. Our branch of the Catholic Church does not insist on individual acceptance of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, by each member separately. Of course public recitation implies it, but a person is not molested for not joining in. She

requires assent to the Apostles' Creed as a condition of entry, by the mouth of the god-parents, in the baptismal service, and as a condition of absolution in the visitation of the sick. Its inclusion in the catechism implies that it must be accepted before confirmation. We are, therefore, able to say that personal assent to the Apostles' Creed is a test of her membership.

A society which believes itself in possession of the truth must exact some modicum of assent from those who belong to it. No one, I suppose, would say that a person who does not believe in God, or in the historical reality of Jesus Christ, has a right to complain if he is excluded from a society that only exists because it does believe in them. But difficulties do arise when people think they cannot honestly say, for instance, 'Born of the Virgin Mary,' or 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.'

Having laid it down, as a general principle, that the Church is bound to insist on her creeds, we may add some facts that may help to modify what seems harsh and unsympathetic in such a view.

First, the creeds call for constant and careful exposition. If the Church's accredited teachers are to insist on them, a grave responsibility lies on them to see that all members of the Church know what they are meant to say. The 'educated layman'—an example to us

in so many ways—is often a most uneducated theologian. He is the sort of person who has been known seriously to object to saying 'He descended into hell,' on the ground that it implies belief in a place of eternal torments.

Secondly, we must remember what was said above, that the creed is an ideal into which we are slowly entering. This statement does apply to the ministers of the Church, though of course with much less force than to the laity, for from the clergy, as the official witnesses to the faith and experience of the whole body of Christians through the ages, and the channels of instruction for others, a more rigid standard of belief is naturally required.

The devotional, or private use of the creeds by the individual, needs only a word. They are clearly to be used for teaching the Church's doctrine, not only to children, but regularly to the faithful; and the faithful should help to do this for themselves more than they do by meditation on them. It has been well said, 'If we thought about the creeds more, we should talk about them less.' Lastly, in the course of our private devotion, we should say them, now and then, not as a programme to which we assent with our minds, but as a humble acceptance of truth, which we are trying to make our own more and more in our lives.

The object of a creed is, not to be abused

as a stumbling-block, but to be used as something inherited by us all in common, and apprehended by each in his measure.

'With the mouth confession is made unto salvation' (*Rom.* x. 10).

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